DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 361 071 PS 021 575

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TITLE Physical Maltreatment and Trust in Peers: Feelings, Reasons, and Behavioral Intentions.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (60th, New Orleans, LA, March 25-28, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Abuse; *Children; Comparative Analysis; Elementary School Students; Emotional Development; Intermediate Grades; *Peer Relationship; *Trust (Psychology)
IDENTIFIERS Affective Response; Physical Abuse

ABSTRACT

A study compared 55 court-adjudicated physically maltreated children between 8 and 12 years of age with 56 nonmaltreated children of the same ages with respect to their feelings about trust in peers. All maltreated children were residents of group homes and were of primarily lower and middle income economic background, from four ethnic backgrounds, while the nonmaltreated children were from Los Angeles public schools and were of ethnic and economic background similar to the maltreated children. As part of an interview, subjects heard two trust scenarios--one involving a promise and the other a secret--and indicated whether they would trust and share with a peer. They were asked to give reasons for their decisions and to tell how they would feel in the scenario. Findings were consistent with clinical observations: (1) compared to nonmaltreated children, maltreated children were more mistrusting and also tended to show an all-or-nothing pattern of trust; (2) maltreated children were more likely to refuse to share, but when they did share, they tended to do so without qualification; whereas, nonmaltreated children tended to qualify whether they would share; (3) compared to nonmaltreated children, maltreated children's reasons about trusting or mistrusting in the scenario indicated diminished concern with affect, the interpersonal relationship, and the future, and somewhat heightened concern with the past; and (4) maltreated and nonmaltreated children's affective responses to the trust scenarios did not differ significantly. (AC)

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ED 361 071

PHYSICAL MALTREATMENT AND TRUST IN PEERS: FEELINGS, REASONS, AND BEHAVIORAL INTENTIONS

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PS 021525

Paper presented at the Society for Research in Child Development, March 25-28, 1993, New Orleans, Louisiana. The authors are grateful to the children who participated in this study, and to Becky Fineman, Gundula Huber, Laura Pena, Renee Siemsen, and Piper Swensen for their help in data collection and to Robert Sockloskie for his help in data analysis. This research was supported by a grant from the UCLA Academic Research Senate Committee to Norma D. Feshbach. Address correspondences to Norma D. Feshbach, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Los Angeles, 405 Hilgard Avenue., Los Angeles, CA 90024.

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Abstract

The relation between physical child maltreatment and children's thoughts and feelings about trust in peers was examined in 8 to 12 year old boys and girls. As part of an interview, subjects heard two trust scenarios and indicated whether they would trust and share with a peer, gave reasons for their decisions, and told how they would feel in the scenario. Findings are consistent with clinical observations: compared to nonmaltreated children, maltreated children were more mistrusting and also tended to show an all-or-nothing pattern of trust. Similarly, maltreated children were more likely to refuse to share, but when they would share, they tended to share without qualification whereas nonmaltreated children tended to qualify whether they would share. Compared to nonmaltreated children, maltreated children's reasons about trusting or mistrusting in the scenario indicated diminished concern with affect, the interpersonal relationship, and the future, and somewhat heightened concern with the past. Maltreated and non maltreated children's affective responses to the trust scenarios did not differ significantly.

PHYSICAL MALTREATMENT AND TRUST IN PEERS: FEELINGS, REASONS, AND BEHAVIORAL INTENTIONS

Introduction

This study utilized a brief interview with two trust narratives, a promise and a secret scenario, to examine how much trust children feel, what are their reasons for their trust and mistrust, what they would do, and how they would feel in trust situations. Based on clinical observations and theoretical expectations, it was predicted that in comparison to nonmaltreated children:

1. Physically maltreated children would respond to trust narratives with less trust.
2. Physically maltreated children's reasons about trust and mistrust would be characterized by greater egocentrism and past focus yet less concern with affect and the interpersonal relationship.
3. Physically maltreated children would indicate less intention to share.
4. Physically maltreated children would respond to the trust scenarios with more dysphoric affect.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 55 court-adjudicated physically maltreated and 56 nonmaltreated 8 to 12 year old children (57 boys and 54 girls) from four ethnic backgrounds. All maltreated children were residents of group homes and were of primarily lower and middle income economic background. All nonmaltreated children were from Los Angeles public schools and were of ethnic and economic background similar to the maltreated children.

Procedures and Measures

Two scenarios to measure trust (see Table 1) were individually administered as part of a more extensive interview within a larger study. In the promise scenario, designed to tap trust within a moral domain of thought, a friend asks to borrow the subject's toy and promises to return it. In the secret scenario, designed to tap trust within an interpersonal domain of thought, a friend asks the subject to disclose something personal. After each narrative, children were asked, "Do you feel trust?" and "How much trust do you feel?" as a measure of trust, "What makes you feel that way?" as a measure of reasons about trust, "What do you do?" as a measure of behavioral intentions, and "How do you feel?" as a measure of affect in a trust situation. Trust and feeling intensities were obtained on a scale from zero to seven utilizing the thermometer depicted on Table 1.

Results

Coding

Codes were developed for categorizing children's reasons about trust and behavioral intentions. Reasons codes were not mutually exclusive, children's responses could fall into more than one category. For thoughts, interrater reliability was .80, and for behavioral intentions, reliability was .97 (Cohen's Kappa).

Table 1

Promise and secret trust scenarios and interview questions.

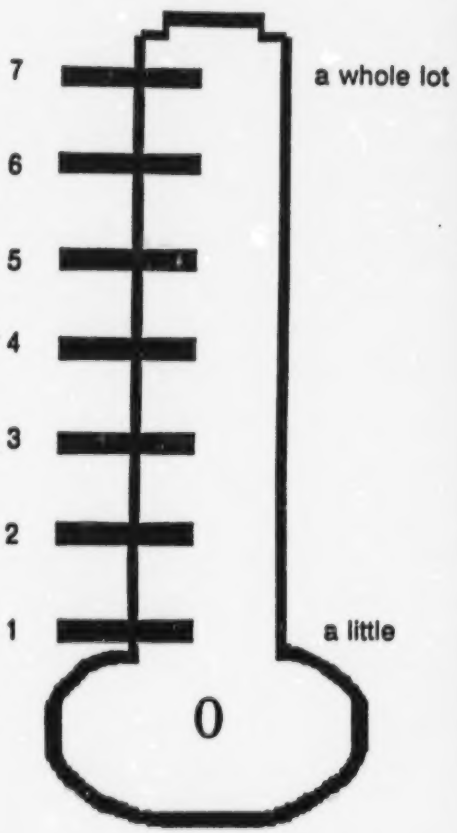
Promise scenario

Imagine that a friend of yours asks if s/he can borrow something of yours that is important to you. S/he promises to give it back soon.

How do you feel? How much of that feeling do you feel (on a scale from 0 - 7)? What makes you feel that way?

Do you feel trust? How much trust do you feel? What makes you feel that way?

What do you do?



Secret scenario

Imagine that something happened to you and it's personal. Your friend is with you and h/he wants you to tell him/her what happened.

How do you feel? How much of that feeling do you feel (on a scale from 0 - 7)? What makes you feel that way?

Do you feel trust? How much trust do you feel? What makes you feel that way?

What do you do?

Trust

Except as noted, no significant differences were obtained between boys and girls on any measures. With regard to trusting, findings were consistent with clinical observations that maltreated children are more mistrusting than are nonmaltreated children. Table 2 indicates that, compared to nonmaltreated children, maltreated children responded more frequently with no trust and less frequently with some trust; maltreated children also somewhat more frequently reported a whole lot trust (across both scenarios combined, $\chi^2 = 5.311$, $p < .10$; for the promise scenario, $\chi^2 = 8.54$, $p < .05$; and for the secret scenario, $\chi^2 = 9.32$, $p < .01$). These findings are consistent with clinical observations that maltreated children are less trusting, and also tend to show an all-or-nothing pattern of greater mistrust, less intermediate trust, and greater high trust.

Reasons for Trust

Children's reasons for trust/mistrust were grouped in the categories: affect, behavior, self, other people, the interpersonal relationship, past, present, and future (See Table 3). In comparison to nonmaltreated children, maltreated children showed diminished concern with affect, the interpersonal relationship, and the future, yet tended to show heightened concern with the past (See Figure 1). As predicted, over both scenarios combined, fewer maltreated children focused on affect ($\chi^2 = 2.96$, $p < .10$), the interpersonal relationship ($\chi^2 = 7.58$, $p < .01$), and the future ($\chi^2 = 5.72$, $p < .05$). On the promise scenario, fewer maltreated children focused on affect ($\chi^2 = 7.09$, $p < .01$), the interpersonal relationship ($\chi^2 = 7.10$, $p < .01$), and the future ($\chi^2 = 6.85$, $p < .05$). On the secret scenario, fewer maltreated children focused on the future ($\chi^2 = 3.55$, $p < .10$); more maltreated children focused on the past but the difference was not significant; and comparisons for future, affect, and interpersonal relationship focused reasons were in the same direction as for the promise scenario, but were not significant. There were no differences for reasons focused on the self, others, the present or behavior.

Table 2

Frequency and intensity of trust of physically maltreated and nonmaltreated children

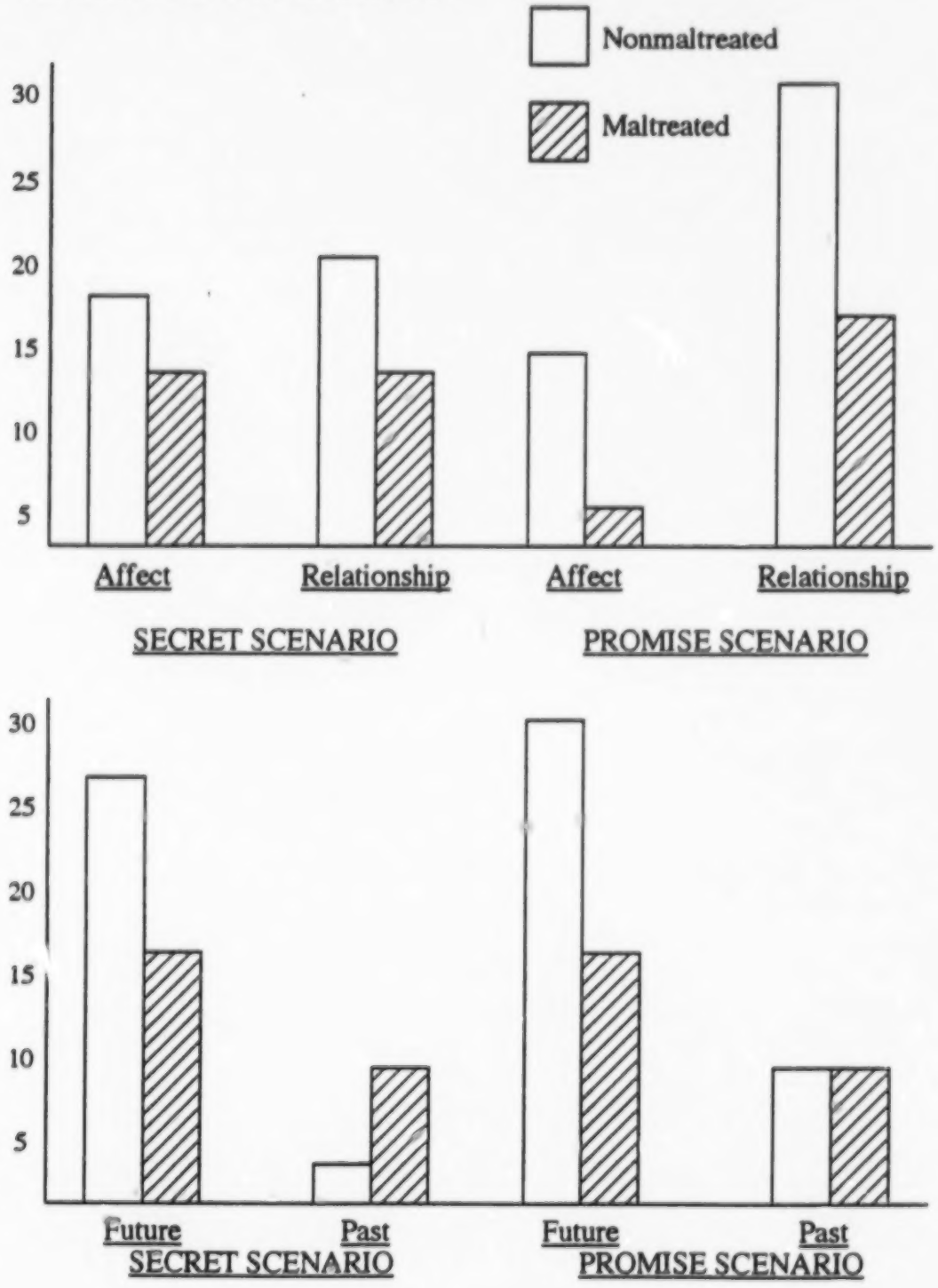
Scenario	Group	No Trust	Some Trust	A Whole lot Trust	Chi-square (df = 2)
Both Scenarios Combined	Maltreated	24	14	17	5.31 ($p < .10$)
	Non-Maltreated	18	26	12	
Secret Scenario	Maltreated	25	11	9	9.32 ($p < .01$)
	Non-Maltreated	19	30	6	
Promise Scenario	Maltreated	17	18	13	8.54 ($p < .01$)
	Non-Maltreated	10	37	9	

Note. "No trust" corresponds to a score of 0 trust, "some trust" corresponds to a score of 1 to 6, and "a whole lot trust" corresponds to a score of 7 on a scale ranging from 0 to 7.

Categories of reasons for trusting and mistrusting and definitions with examples

Category	Definition and examples
Affect	Reasons refer to feelings of self, target, or others. *(I'm afraid to share it; I don't him to get mad).*
Behavior	Reasons refer to behaviors of self or others. *(She's told my secrets before; he's nagging me).*
Self	Reasons refer to the subject and the subject's feelings, behaviors, and outcomes. *(I don't like to trust; I won't get to play with it).*
Other	Reasons refer to other people and other people's feelings, behaviors, and outcomes. *(People told my secrets, She'll feel good if I share).*
Interpersonal Relationship	Reasons refer to the relationship between the subject and the target, and how it impacts or is impacted by trust and sharing. *(They're my friend; he trusts me so I trust him).*
Past	Reasons refer to events in the past. *(He kept things before; She returned things).*
Present	Reasons refer to the situation in the present. *(She's nagging me; It's too expensive).*
Future	Reasons refer to outcomes of trust and sharing. *(They'll steal it; they'll keep it secret).*

Figure 1. Frequency of use of reasons categories by nonmaltreated and maltreated children for each scenario.



Behavioral Intentions

Maltreated children reported more intention to not share and less intention to share on both scenarios (secret scenario, $X^2 = 3.99$, $p < .05$; promise scenario, $X^2 = 6.04$, $p < .05$). Four categories of behavioral intentions were identified: Aggression, Nonsharing, Qualified Sharing, and Unqualified Sharing (See Table 4). Compared to the nonmaltreated children, for both scenarios, more maltreated children reported an Aggression or Nonsharing intention (See Figure 2). For Aggression, the association was significant only for the promise scenario ($X^2 = 8.78$, $p < .01$); on this scenario only male maltreated subjects expressed an Aggression intention, and gender and Aggression also associated significantly ($X^2 = 8.78$, $p < .01$). On both scenarios maltreated children reported more Nonsharing than did nonmaltreated children (promise scenario: $X^2 = 4.65$, $p < .05$; secret scenario: $X^2 = 3.277$, $p < .10$). Figure 2 also indicates that whereas both groups reported Unqualified Sharing intentions with similar frequency, the maltreated children reported significantly less Qualified Sharing intentions on both scenarios (promise scenario: $X^2 = 9.17$, $p < .01$; secret scenario: $X^2 = 5.44$, $p < .05$). In sum, compared to nonmaltreated children, maltreated children show an all-or-nothing pattern of more frequent refusal to share, less sharing with qualification, and similar sharing without qualification.

Affect

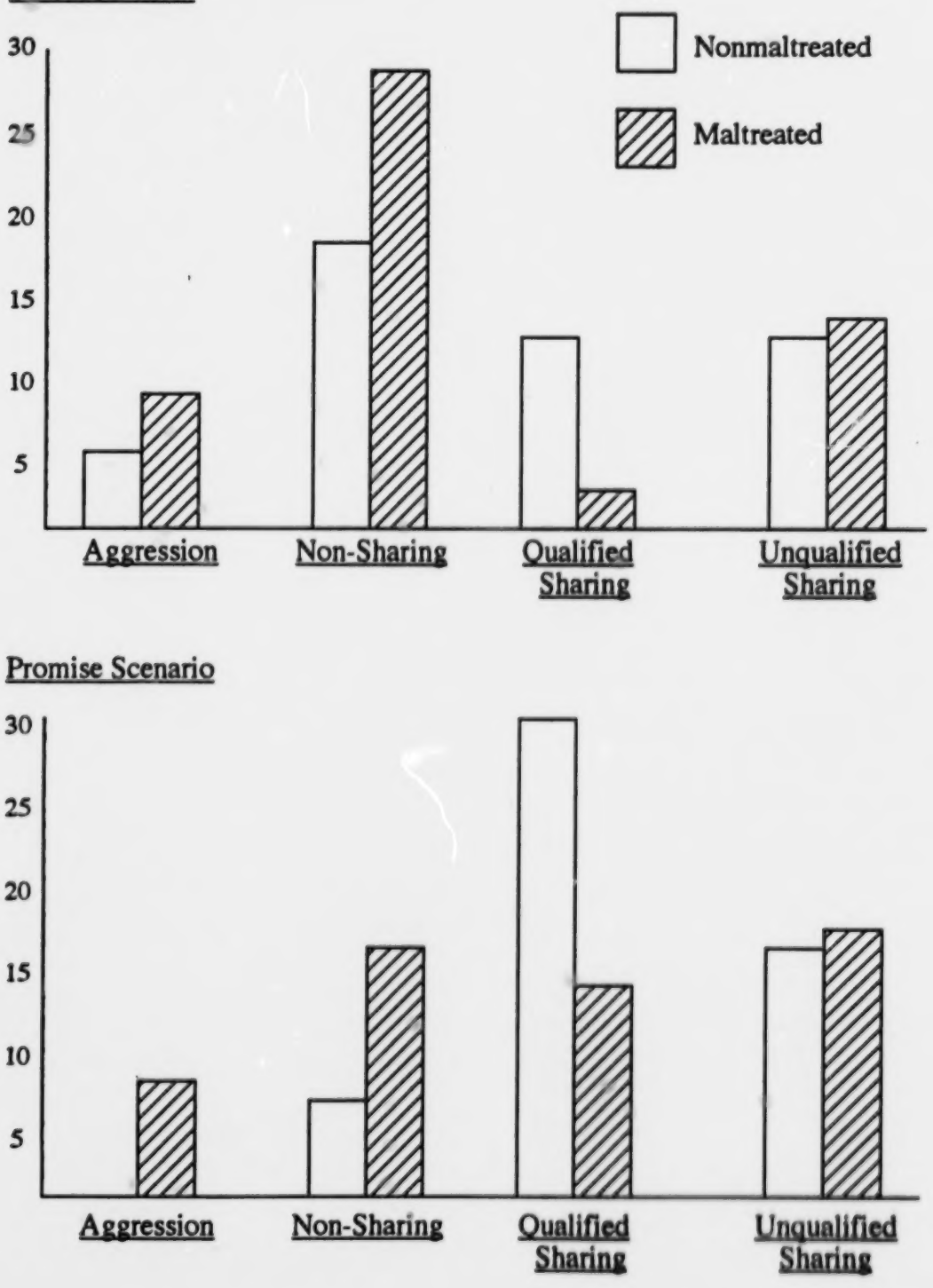
With regard to affective responses there were few significant differences between maltreated and nonmaltreated children; both groups responded with predominantly dysphoric affect, and no consistent pattern of difference between the groups was identifiable.

Table 4

Behavioral intentions categories and definitions with examples

Category	Definition and examples
Aggression	Subject responds to request with violence, revenge, or hostile verbal reactions such as yelling or telling an authority. *(I'll hit them; I'll take something of theirs; I'll say "no" real loud; I'll tell their parents).*
Non-sharing	Subject responds to request by not sharing or disclosing but does not aggress against target. *(I'll tell them I don't want to share; I won't tell them anything personal; I'll walk away; I'll tell them I can't share.)*
Qualified Sharing	Subject responds to request by sharing only under specific circumstances, such as only to certain people, only certain information or possessions, or only if the subject can guarantee the target's honesty. *(I'll only tell one friend of mine, and no one else; I'll give it to him if he trades with me; I'll tell her my secret but I'll also warn her that I'll tell her mom if she lets out the secret).*
Unqualified Sharing	Subject responds by sharing or disclosing and does not qualify this behavioral intention with special requirements of the target. *(I'll let them use it and just hope they give it back; I'll tell them so they can help me with my problems; I'll be honest with them).*

Figure 2. Frequency of use of behavioral intentions categories by nonmaltreated and maltreated children for each scenario.



Conclusions

1. Physically maltreated children show greater mistrust and unwillingness to share.

2. Physically maltreated children tend to show an all-or-nothing pattern in trust and sharing.

3. Physically maltreated and nonmaltreated children think differently about trust: Physically maltreated children report less concern with affect, the interpersonal relationship context, and outcomes of trusting and sharing; physically maltreated children report somewhat greater concern with how past interactions influence trust.

4. Given the findings, trust development may be an important area for therapeutic intervention with physically maltreated children. Therapeutic intervention may focus on altering how physically maltreated children think about trust and it's role in interpersonal relationships.